Sections
Focus
Columns and Reviews
Consulting
Training
News & Announcements

Archives
Browse past issues of Praxis

About Us
About Us

Submissions
Submit an article to Praxis

Home » Archives » Fall 2009 (Volume 7 Issue 1) - Professionalization and the Writing Center, Part I

Right Place, Wrong Timing

by ***Devin Black****, Eastern Illinois University*

Consulting sessions in the writing center occur at a unique time during the writing process. Generally, a student will bring in an entire draft of a paper–oftentimes with the idea that it is completely finished–for a tutor to look over. Thus, we do not have the advantage of engaging the student over the entire writing process but only during a small sliver *in medias res*. Approaching a student writer in the middle of his or her work as opposed to either extremes of chronological time–namely, the beginning or the end–limits a consultant's ability to engage the student effectively in a sequential, temporal sense.

As a result of being put "in the middle of things," *kairos* enables consultants to stretch the limits of chronos both through our restricted session time and in being placed in the center of the student's writing progression. As a consultant, I am unable to discover everything significant about a student's paper in an hour-long or shorter appointment, but then again I am not an editor. As McDuffy noted earlier, one of the toughest concepts to put into practice is setting the agenda at the beginning of the session. For example, while looking over the assignment sheet and asking students what they think about their papers, important questions such as "What do you want to accomplish with this paper or this session?" sometimes waste time. I have asked these questions before in sessions, but the replies almost always come back as versions of "I just want to get this paper over with" or "I came in here to get it fixed." Of course, such disappointing replies provide opportunities, but time is pressing for them in terms of due dates, and time is limiting me in terms of session length.

In addition, while I am focused on higher-order concerns such as a strong thesis, the student is almost always preoccupied with that looming gloom of being evaluated on "grammar." Finding a negotiated space is exactly where *kairos* enters the equation. I recall one session with a student in which he was adamant about fixing grammar issues.

My most personally memorable session–and the one I often think of in terms of kairos–is also perhaps my biggest failure.

I tried to negotiate an agenda with him: we would look at some higher order concerns, then we would focus on grammar. The student would have none of it. Fixing grammar would enable him to get a grade high enough to avoid revision. Seeing that the tension was building–similar to Klein's experience–I decided on the spot that we would work on grammar first, allowing a lower order concern primary significance in the session. For the introduction of his paper, we worked sentence by sentence, figuring out how unclear sentences could be reworded so as to capture his intended meaning. We also addressed verb shifts and comma issues. When we reached the thesis statement, the issue that most concerned me, I framed our discussion of it as I had in earlier sentences: "What are you trying to say *here*?" Knowing what a thesis statement is supposed to

accomplish, he began to come up with different ways of wording it to make it stronger. Using "grammar" as a blanket term, we managed to discuss both mechanics and higher level issues without sacrificing either to *chronos*.

My most personally memorable session–and the one I often think of in terms of kairos–is also perhaps my biggest failure. The student brought in an assignment that was two pages in length. The assignment called for an analytical paper four pages in length on Louise Erdrich's short story "The Red Convertible." This student was one of the few who came in and did not mention grammar as a major issue. Instead, she needed to come up with at least two more pages of analysis. Before she read her paper aloud, she briefly mentioned a previous trip to the writing center for this assignment and how that session did not help her at all. After reading her paper, it became clear that she was struggling to understand what constitutes literary analysis. In the past I have found it challenging to describe what constitutes analysis to students, and I have attempted to refer them back to their professors to explain the concept in greater detail since professors conceptualize "analysis" in myriad ways. This student, however, did not have the luxury of time; her paper was due around four hours after the session would end.

My strategy was to ask her about some of the scenes she wrote about already in her paper, which was more summary of specific scenes than analysis. Yet she chose those scenes because they were important. I asked exactly that: "Why choose to write about this?" Prompted by more questions, she proceeded to draw connections to other parts of the story as well as contemporary situations dealing with war and suicide that reflect those in the story. The strategy was indeed working because the student became more engaged and was doing more and more of the talking, reasoning, and writing. I thought that the impromptu exercise of expanding the text she already had was another triumph of *kairos*. Then a warning sign came. The student said, in no uncertain terms, "I can do this now, but on my own I won't be able to." With that, the session went from being productive to at a standstill in a matter of a minute. Given that she was able to do the analysis when prompted with questions, I let her sit there in silence to think about what else she could write about since I wanted to avoid putting too many of my own thoughts or questions into the paper. I thought at *that* particular moment with *that* particular paper and *that* particular writer, she only needed time and some encouragement to continue her analysis. I thought this judgment call was the right one given the circumstances. And I was wrong.

Quickly, the student grew visibly frustrated as I sat there silently. All of a sudden, she gave me a very curt "Thank you" and left the writing center. While a *kairotic* moment delivers help to the student and can turn a stalled session into an effective one, I ended up making a choice that inadvertently turned a session from working *for* this student to working *against* this student. If I had made a different decision, such as to keep questioning the student about scenes she remembered the most, the session might have rolled on to its full length and the student may have left the writing center feeling confident. The failure at that one point in the session underscores the importance of *kairos* in consulting sessions and how a very un-*kairotic* moment could negate everything the student might have gained.

[*To continue reading "*Kairotic *Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below*]

Using *Kairos* to Mediate–Serena Heath

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